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ABSTRACT

This study at a midwestern, private, liberal arts college compared undergraduate student reactions in an educational psychology course between students whose reading assignments were in a conventional textbook vs. those of students whose reading assignments made use of primary sources, such as original research or case studies. At the end of each semester, students anonymously completed a questionnaire, designed by the instructor, on their perceptions of course readings, including the usefulness, challenge, interest, motivation, and critical thinking content. Each student was also briefly interviewed shortly after responding to the questionnaire. Results confirm a difference in student perceptions based on the type of readings used. Student understanding of the course content proved to be better when primary source reading was used rather than the conventional textbook. Primary source readings confirmed the more practical aspects of theory and how it could be used in the classroom practice. These readings also motivated more self-reflection about teaching and what type of teacher one wanted to become. (Contains 13 references.) (NAV)

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Using Primary Sources in Teacher Education: Linking Research and Practice

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As a college professor, I have become concerned with motivating students in my classroom. Along with my colleagues, I seek ways in which to actively engage students by becoming partners with me in the learning process. In addition, I hope to encourage students to take responsibility for their learning. Jones and Meyers (1993) describe this change in attitude as one of acknowledging that "students learn not by just absorbing content, but by critically analyzing, discussing, and using content in meaningful ways" (p. 6). As a result, many college professors are reconsidering the ways in which we engage and motivate the learners in our classrooms.

A great deal of what happens in our college classrooms is determined by the reading assigned. Students are motivated to read assigned text depending on how relevant they feel it is to classroom activities, their understanding of course content, and the extent to which they will be held accountable for the reading. One way of increasing education students' engagement in course content is to use primary sources such as case studies, original research or personal accounts of teachers.

In an article on using primary sources to teach history, Dobyns (1992) asserts that "History itself isn't boring: it's just taught that way. As in science, the natural curiosity of students is snuffed out at an early age (Alter & Denworth, 1990, p. 31). This doesn't have to happen" (p. 52). In my interactions with students in Educational Psychology, I have encountered similar attitudes towards content presented in a textbook. On course evaluations these students have noted that "some of this stuff is boring." Price (1990) suggests the use of primary sources to teach introductory psychology,

> The benefits of reading primary sources are many, especially for first-year students. Foremost is the realization that they not only can read and comprehend Freud, for example, but also that his style and subject matter can interest them. Inhibiting awe is transformed into curiosity (p. 49).

In addition to the potential of developing a deeper understanding of course content and relating it to real life, primary source readings can also help students become excited about the content.

Students' understanding of the course content may be more in-depth as the result of reading primary sources. Price (1990) continued, "the breadth and depth of most pivotal works provide many integrations lost in desiccating text summaries" (p. 49). Texts may oversimplify theorists' perspectives and research findings. Not only can this "turn students off" to the content of Educational Psychology, but it can eliminate the need for critically thinking about different theoretical perspectives. In order to make students active participants in the learning process, the integration of primary sources needs to be considered and evaluated.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study evolved from my interest in formally documenting differences between students in my Educational Psychology courses based on the reading assigned. While the main goal of this research was to study and improve my own practice, the results merit sharing with other college faculty who are considering alternatives to a textbook. The purpose of this study was to compare undergraduate students' perceptions of and attitudes towards an Educational Psychology course in which two distinct types of course readings were used. An Educational Psychology textbook was used one semester and primary sources the following semester. For the purpose of this study, a primary source was defined as original research, original theoretical perspectives, and "real-life" classroom scenarios or stories (case studies).

RESEARCH METHODS

Participants were enrolled in an undergraduate Educational Psychology course at a midwestern, private liberal arts college. Fifteen students (9 female, 6 male) were enrolled

in the fall semester and 23 (14 female, 9 male) enrolled in the spring semester. Participants' academic ability can be characterized by their above average SAT scores. Within the college, students are also characterized by faculty as "hard workers" and motivated to learn.

Data were collected across two different semesters in the same academic year. During the fall semester, Anita Woolfolk's Educational Psychology, 5th ed. (1993) and Readings and Cases in Educational Psychology (1993) were used for course readings. During the spring semester, a variety of books were used which included: For the Children: Lessons from a Visionary Principal (Cartwright, 1993), Approaches to Teaching (Fenstermacher, 1992), Among Schoolchildren (Kidder, 1989), In There With the Kids (Kobrin, 1992), Perspectives on Learning (Phillips, 1991), Horace's School (Sizer, 1992), and Getting Down to Cases: Learning to Teach with Case Studies (Wasserman, 1993). In addition, the students were given a course reader put together by the course instructor with a collection of primary source literature, specifically current educational research. At the end of each semester, students anonymously responded to a questionnaire designed by the instructor which addressed their perceptions of course readings. Items included: the usefulness of course readings in understanding content, the challenge of course readings, the need to think critically about content, and the interest and motivation levels of these readings.

While there may be some concern over the difference in data collection over time, measures were taken to ensure consistency of the ways in which the data were collected during each semester. The questionnaire was administered during the fourteenth week of the semester and interviews were conducted the two weeks following. Each semester, the same general questions were asked of students in interviews. Specific questions were generated for each student based on responses to the questionnaire. In addition, the topics covered in the course across the semesters remained consistent even though the reading assigned was different. The ways in which the content was covered was obviously

different in that the reading assigned each semester drove the discussions that took place in class sessions.

In an effort to gain a deeper understanding of student perceptions, each student was briefly interviewed shortly after responding to the questionnaire. Three undergraduate students (all seniors) not enrolled in the course served as interviewers. This was done in an effort to make students comfortable in expressing their honest opinions and perceptions with peers as opposed to an authority figure. In an effort to maintain the integrity and consistency of interviews, all interviewers were trained in techniques for facilitating effective interviews. Prior to interviewing students, we reviewed student questionnaires to decide on a set of common questions to ask all students. In addition, follow-up questions to individual responses on the questionnaire were composed in order to allow students an opportunity to elaborate and clarify their ideas in the interview session. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. These fieldnotes and questionnaires were later analyzed for common themes. In addition, student responses related to assigned readings on a course evaluation were also considered.

FINDINGS

Analyses of the data indicate a difference in student perceptions of and attitudes toward Educational Psychology as the result of using primary source readings. Three themes emerged when questionnaires and interviews were analyzed. First, students who took the course when primary sources were used felt that the use of actual classroom situations allowed them to apply research and theory to real-life classroom situations. Students who read the textbook did not indicate such an understanding of how theory was connected to practice. Second, while students from both semesters expressed dislike of the theoretical material the students who read primary sources understood the importance of having that foundation by which to understand the complexity of teaching and learning. Finally, as a result of reading original works of educators, students in the spring semester

were more reflective about the kind of teacher they wanted to be. Reading a textbook did not inspire students in the fall semester to be so introspective about teaching. The results of the study are summarized below by these three themes that emerged from questionnaires and follow-up interviews.

1. Primary Sources Provide Opportunities for Applying Information to Real-life Teaching Situations

Students indicated that reading "real-life" stories about teaching and by teachers were more interesting to them and that primary sources provided opportunities for them to make connections between theory and practice. As a result, students felt they had a greater understanding of theory related to Educational Psychology and a better understanding of how this theory relates to the practice of teaching. One student stated,

> With two of the books, Among Schoolchildren and In There with the Kids, it's really clear how the different theories and methods are being applied. That's why they are really good to learn about teaching from.

Theories were not talked about in class without the context of real teaching situations. This approach to the teaching of Educational Psychology helped students understand the application of theory into practice. Another student explained,

> The books added to my understanding of course content by making it more memorable. If I had a theory like behaviorism, instead of just thinking reinforcement, I can think of direct examples from case studies - like kids getting candy for doing their work. I think that it helps me get a good understanding of the theories and helps me remember them better.

Students from the textbook group had a more difficult time understanding how the theoretical principles we were studying applied to classroom teaching. One student explained,

> I didn't really learn, I mean I knew what different teaching strategies or learning strategies were, but I didn't really learn much about their practical application.

Another student talked about his lack of interest in the material because the reading was not applied,

> I didn't find the learning theories too interesting because I can't really apply that...I don't see how people can apply that to real life. It just doesn't seem...I don't know, it seemed so pointless to learn that stuff.

In other words, students reading primary sources found examples in the readings that helped them to remember and understand. Many of the students expressed dislike of the theoretical material, but many students in the primary source group understood the importance of having that foundation by which to understand teaching and learning. But, students in the textbook group never really understood the necessity of the theoretical framework presented in the text because there was little actual classroom teaching scenarios to apply it to. One student in the primary source group summed it up this way,

> A combination of research articles and books made it possible to see both statistically and from more individual perspectives what happens in the classroom. The case studies made me think about what I would do if I were a teacher and what different theorists would suggest I try. The readings provided a useful context for the theories that we studied.

The primary sources provided that vehicle by which theories could be read and applied. By applying the theories to real-life situations, students could make sense of the factors that influence teachers' decisions.

Students felt that reading actual research studies allowed them to analyze effective practice and use critical thinking skills to make sense of what researchers had to say about teaching. One student said,

> The problems that actually occurred fall in nicely with the case studies and the field experience so you get a sense that these are actually things that are happening in the classroom. I think that is something you couldn't get out of a text. I like the fact that we have read articles out of journals because when you read the actual research and the

person who writes the research, I think you get much more out of analyzing it yourself than reading what the textbook author would have written about it.

Reading a variety of educational research gave students the opportunity to analyze what researchers found in their studies. Students could then learn how to interpret research results and use these skills to make decisions about teaching practice.

Students from the textbook group complained of the lack of real-life experiences. One student explained,

> The textbook gave me a good overview of a lot of the main issues in education. However, I think some areas might have been better covered with books or articles delving a little more deeply. Some of the textbook subjects were covered kind of generally - I might have like more concrete experiences of teacher incorporated into the text reading.

As indicated in the data, students enrolled in this course wanted real-life case studies in which they could apply theoretical and research based knowledge to actual classroom situations. Primary source readings offered this opportunity whereas the textbook content did not.

Prospective teachers' critical thinking and decision making skills can be improved by analyzing actual classroom situations. The use of case studies provide students with a classroom context for applying theory and research taught in the college classroom to real life teaching situations. Students find this method of learning theory more interesting. And, students indicated that they were better able to remember and comprehend theory and research when they were able to apply that to a classroom context. Students using case studies are utilizing application, synthesis, and evaluation levels of cognitive thinking when taking their knowledge about teaching and applying it to classroom practice.

2. Understanding the complexities of teaching

Students were better able to comprehend and appreciate the complexities of teaching when primary source readings were used. A student from the primary source group candidly responded to the questionnaire,

> I realize now that there is more to teaching than I anticipated. There are so many things to consider - it seems challenging.

While some students may not understand how complex the decision making in teaching can be, this students reading primary sources were better able to get a sense of the complexity involved in the professional tasks of teachers. Another student said,

> All the different readings made me realize that teaching is a daily job that is testing, draining, yet rewarding. I didn't have a clue about how to create a positive learning environment but the readings along with our analyzing classroom situations helped me realize how many decisions I have to make.

The students in the textbook group felt that the textbook was oversimplistic in its discussion of teaching and thus did not challenge to think critically about teaching. One student commented,

> The textbook was just giving a general overview and wasn't...if it had been articles that were taking a strong side on issues they might have elicited more response from us. But the textbook was probably a little more wishy washy to me.

Another student supported the student above,

> I know that in a textbook they have to go over every single little topic and give explanations. But I think it placed a lot of emphasis on what is the definition of this and how does Piaget compare to Vygotsky. I felt like it was more of a vocabulary lesson. The diction was very simple and things were gone over a number of times. It got better when the author gave specific references to teaching or even her own life saying well my daughter would do this an that means this and this. That kind of thing I find more helpful than pages and pages of definitions.

Students from the textbook group clearly would have found it more helpful to have real life teaching situations to help understand how theory and research effects practice. For prospective teachers, it is important in their development to understand the complexity of decisions that teachers make in a given day or week. By analyzing classroom situations and simulating the process teachers go through via case studies, students are better able to understand the responsibilities involved with teaching on a daily basis. A student from the primary source group said,

> I think that the readings concerning actual classroom scenarios challenged me to think critically the most. They gave me a context to imagine myself in, brought up sticky situations which teachers are frequently thrown in to, and situations that do not call for one easy solution. I think you need a broad concept of what you are trying to do but you have to also be aware that it's not a perfect set up. You are going to have all these different things going on and it's not going to go the way you want to always...I like that fact that it brought in things that are going to happen.

When a textbook was used students did not indicate the same feelings. On the other hand, students from the primary source group learned that teachers deal with a wide variety of potential classroom scenarios. In addition, students began to examine how they would react and what decisions they would make if put in these classroom situations. Teaching became a reality for students who read primary sources. Students had a context to work with for understanding theories and principles. Learning about the world of teaching was no longer a nebulous, abstract concept but a reality for students who read primary sources.

3. What kind of teacher do I want to be?

By examining case studies, teacher stories, and educational research, students in the second group began to formulate ideas and plans for their own classrooms in the future. Reading ideas which are applicable in the classroom, helped the students make some preliminary sense of what their future classrooms might be like. One student explained,

> Well the books like the Madeline Cartwright book and In There with the Kids and the books that we have read that are written by teachers or principals or people that have observed those people about the real life things have really happened to me too...it's kind of like having a little view into the real world classroom situation and so I've been able to kind of think about what kinds of things I would like to implement into my classroom and what things I should avoid with the case studies. We've done a lot of case studies and have been able to discuss the problems that teachers have had. Those things, I think, are very valuable and I feel like I have a strong base to start out with in what works and what doesn't in a classroom. I know it will be different when I actually teach, but I think it is really valuable to see other people's experiences and the theories and principles books. The Approaches to Learning has been useful though not as interesting to me and I think that a lot of the theories that we have talked about will come up in my teaching.

When ideas about teaching are put in the context of real life experiences, the students are better able to make the connection between theory and practice. When this connection takes place, students are then able to start formulating ideas about their own teaching practice. Another student commented on the usefulness of reading primary sources,

> The course readings make me think about how I could take research and theory and apply them to my own classroom. It made me think about how I want my class to be even though it may be different than anything else.

Another student from the primary source group said,

> The course readings have been very influential in giving me a basic knowledge about teaching and I feel that I've learned much about what my classroom may be like. I learned this by discussing mistakes that other teachers have made and problems that they have encountered.

While students in the primary source group were able to begin developing their own ideas about teaching and what kind of teacher they would want to be, students in the textbook

group were not motivated by the reading to do so. It seems that when prospective teachers have the opportunity to read about real life teaching and then analyze it with the theory they are learning, they can begin to think like teachers. They can begin to shape in their minds what being a teacher means for themselves.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to understand students' perceptions of the course readings assigned while enrolled in an undergraduate Educational Psychology course. On a teacher-made questionnaire and in follow-up interviews, students did indeed indicate differences in using a textbook and primary sources as course reading material. In comparing students' comments it became apparent that students understanding of the course content was better when primary source reading were assigned. The opportunity to apply theory to practice helped them have a better sense of how theory can provide a groundwork for guiding practice in the classroom. Primary source readings motivated student to be self reflective about teaching and what kind of teacher they wanted to be.

CONCLUSIONS

The primary goal of this research was to collect data that would guide personal reflection on teaching practices. It is our hope to share with you the findings so that you may consider the use of primary sources in the college classroom. The data from this research adds to our knowledge about teaching Educational Psychology. While the reading assigned to students in an Educational Psychology course is typically a textbook, this research suggests that college professors should consider using a selection of primary literature combined with books which demonstrate realistic teaching situations. In this study, students experienced increased interest and motivational levels. Students became active participants in the process of learning about teaching when primary sources were incorporated. Students reading primary sources were better able to critically analyze

classroom situations and begin to develop a personal philosophy about how theory and research will guide their effective teaching practice. This research indicated that primary sources can be valuable building blocks and springboards for discussion of content and issues related to Educational Psychology.

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